

[By Bernie Becker](#)

A group of House Democrats is seizing on a new negative release from Standard and Poor's to reiterate their case that the discussion over raising the debt ceiling needs to be held separately from that over deficit reduction.

Well over half of the House Democratic Caucus — 114 lawmakers in all — have joined a letter asking the party's leadership to make a so-called "clean" hike of the debt limit the official caucus position.

"The debt ceiling is about one thing: affirming that America pays its bills," reads the letter, which was spearheaded by Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.). "It does not authorize new taxpayer obligations; it affirms to the world our commitment to pay obligations already incurred."

S&P announced Monday that it was revising its take on U.S. debt from "stable" to "negative," causing sharp declines in the stock market. The ratings service said it was doing so because it was skeptical that top officials in Washington could come together on longer-term deficit reduction.

Some top Republicans in Washington have said that the debt ceiling will not be raised unless a proposal is paired with substantial deficit-reduction measures.

Still, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner said over the weekend that top Republican lawmakers had told the administration that they were "not going to play around" with the debt ceiling. Geithner's department has said it expects the government to hit the ceiling around the middle of next month, and that if Congress does not raise the limit, the U.S. would default on debt starting around July 8.

But Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), the House Budget Committee chairman, signaled that he had not heard those sorts of statements from GOP leadership in his chamber.

Welch and a smaller group of House Democrats also pushed for a clean debt-ceiling hike last week.